Leisure and society in colonial Brazzaville

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Introduction

In 1936, a controversy erupted over Brazzaville football. The subject of debate was whether players should wear shoes in matches or play barefooted. The European administrators of the Native Sports Federation decreed that wearing shoes encouraged violence on the field, that Africans were unsportsmanlike, and that they must, therefore, play barefooted. Some team captains, who were also part of the urban elite and wore shoes on a daily basis, were so outraged that they wrote to the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa (AEF) asking him to reverse the ruling, which, on the advice of sports administrators, he did not. This shoes controversy brought to a head the already contentious relationship of European sports organizers with players in Bacongo and Poto-Poto, Brazzaville's two African districts. When the team leaders organized a boycott, the official football league collapsed. The Catholic mission, old adversaries of the administration for the hearts and minds of African youth, quietly built up their teams from disaffected players. Some older players simply retired from league play but continued to participate in informal matches in their spare time, as they had done since they were youngsters in the city streets. Young players and those too poor to own shoes had little interest in the conflict and went on playing barefooted, as they had always done.[1]

This incident, preserved in a file in the Congolese National Archives under the rubric of 'Petitions to the Governor-General',[2] captures the essence of this book which reconstructs the daily-life history of an African colonial town through exploring how the inhabitants created, contested and occupied their leisure time. The mediation of social relations through cultural symbols, forms and events has been a powerful theme in recent studies of life under colonial rule. Simple dichotomies of tradition and modernity, domination and resistance have faded away, as scholars have rather sought to understand colonialism as an arena of negotiation in which all kinds of political, cultural and social transformations were worked out. In the changing and sometimes volatile conditions of new colonial towns, where social

relations and cultural forms were characterized by a greater degree of choice and experimentation than was possible in the more deeply rooted patterns of village life, the 'debate' was particularly intense.[3] The stakes, which had a great deal to do with control, security and identity, were also high. Beyond that, however, choice was to do with 'communities of taste', which from an individual perspective did not always coincide with the preferences of others in a social group, such as generation, ethnicity, class or gender.[4] Leisure activities and interests might include sport, fashion, music and dance, sociability in particular bars and cafes, and association membership. These topics are at the heart of this book whose overall theme is summed up in what Frederick Cooper has called 'the struggle for the city', which he describes as 'cultural as much as political, and it goes on every day, as well as bursting forth when basic structures are at issue'.[5]

The city in question is Brazzaville, once the capital of AEF and now the capital of the Republic of Congo. Situated on the north banks of Malebo Pool where the Congo river forms a great lake before it hurtles through its rapids to the ocean, the modern town officially dates its establishment to 1880 when the Tio ruler, Iloo, ceded the site to the French representative, Savorgnan de Brazza.[6] Sprawling for some 15 kilometres along the Congo river, the modern city's population is well over half a million. In many respects, it typifies the overblown capitals of developing countries, as inhabitable living space is ever more crowded, people swarm daily around the law courts contesting property claims and the tentacles of the city continue to absorb the countryside, spreading out beyond the Djoué river to the west and along the foothills of the Tio plateau to the east. Today, Congo is one of the most highly urbanized countries in Africa and about a third of the population lives in Brazzaville. A recent special issue of the journal *Politique Africaine*, devoted to Congo, took as its title 'Congo, a suburb of Brazzaville', a theme explored in articles dealing with the capital's economic, social and cultural attractions.[7] While this rapid urbanization dates only from the Second World War, a small but influential nucleus of townsfolk have lived in Brazzaville since the early twentieth century, and it was they who were often pioneers in developing the new activities and tastes that went with being 'people of the city'.[8]

In modern-day Brazzaville, Sunday is the big day for leisure, as it was in the colonial period. Taking a taxi to visit friends on the other side of the city, the passenger finds the driver delighted to talk about the latest bands and pop singers whose music blasts forth from the speaker at the back of his cab. Friends meet at popular cafes and bars to eat local food such as fish, brochettes, manioc leaves, rice, baguettes and manioc bread;

drink local varieties of Kronenberg beer or soft drinks; and dance to the music of home-grown stars such as Youlou Mabiala and his 'Kamikaze' band, or the ever-popular Zairois maestros such as Franco. Others follow the crowd moving towards the *Stade de la Révolution* where the top Bacongo team *Diables Noirs* ('Black Devils') plays the Poto-Poto champions, *L'Etoile du Congo* ('Star of Congo'). Boys around the market and on the platform of the railway station hawk sports and film magazines from France and Zaire. In the streets and on open patches of ground, youths are playing *mwanafoot* (Lingala, 'children's football'), women gather in recreational dance associations which are also mutual-aid societies, men play dominoes and cards, and people stroll about in their 'Sunday clothes'. As darkness falls on Saturday and Sunday evenings, the life of the town throbs on, especially in Poto-Poto, where an animated street-life continues long after people have gone to bed in the quieter suburb of Bacongo.

Time, work and leisure

This book explores two aspects of leisure in the colonial town. One was the struggle to create a new order of time and space, which grew out of European attempts to impose colonialist and capitalist structures and African efforts to create a congenial environment to suit their needs beyond the harassment of colonial control. While urban boundaries of time and space were often initiated through laws and limits imposed by town administrators, employers and missionaries, they were also initiated and adjusted by African responses, which might be confrontational or non-confrontational, depending on the advantages. Since neither the African nor European population was monolithic, a variety of positions might be adopted. Thus, leisure time and place were arenas of contest and mediation within European and African sub-communities as well as between them.

Evans-Pritchard, in his work on the Nuer, pioneered the study of African rural time as a social construction embedded in the activities of daily life. Time, he found, was task oriented. The 'daily time-piece is the cattle-clock' and, 'the round of pastoral tasks' marked the passage of the day. Economic and social activities caused people to 'pay attention to the movements of the heavenly bodies and to the ecological variations that they cause', but there was no abstract measurement of time.[9] Studies of rural time in Central Africa have come to similar conclusions. Villagers have a well-structured sense of time that is honed to their economic, religious and social life, and time is valued according to tasks and activities, so that work to produce goods or services, socially significant

time, and recreational time are all valued differently.[10] There is a clear sense of different activities being associated with time, for example, 'time for amusement', as opposed to the more significant 'time for work', 'time for weighty conversation', or 'time for mourning'.[11] But time is constructed around the event rather than the contrary, as in industrialized societies. Village or task-oriented time is, therefore, 'elastic' and based on the activity. Abraham Ndinga-Mbo, the Congolese historian, has suggested that whereas European time 'enslaves', villagers rather think of 'creating' time.[12] A seminar at the University of Marien Ngouabi came to the similar conclusion that, 'among rural people, time does not carry the weight and importance that we attribute to it in our modern way of life. Time floats in its imprecision and inexactitude. It is made in the image of the society which conceived it.'[13]

The transformation of European time, its measurement, and the emergence of concepts of work and leisure is a story that is well documented and is broadly paralleled in twentieth-century Congo, as the forces of capitalism, colonialism and Christianity expanded their spheres of influence. Jacques Le Goff associated the regulation and segmentation of time with the needs of the medieval church and early forms of capitalism. Bells and clocks were 'instruments of economic, social and political domination', wielded by merchants who ran a commune and for whom 'time cost money'. A 'new harshness' crept into the measurement of the working day for both employers and workers.[14] Schedules and calendars became tools of temporal regularity, replacing the seasons and natural control with social control.[15] However, workers also benefited from these temporal developments, for clocks introduced a precision of measurement which could be used to their benefit.[16] In nineteenth-century industrializing societies, too, the exactness of telling time became not only a means for employers to enforce work-discipline, but a focal point for workers struggling to improve their conditions of employment.[17] It was in this context that divisions of work time and leisure time sharpened, with certain days such as Sunday and weekends taking on their distinguishing characteristic as holidays, or time without work.[18] Rybczynski, in his book *Waiting for the weekend* makes the claim that 'there has never been a human society that did not recognize the need for regular days off'.[19] However, articulating different notions of time that have evolved in different societies is a tricky business. Indeed, they can be the basis for conflict, as Keletso Atkins has shown in her work on Zulu workers in South Africa, where rural perceptions of a month based on a lunar calendar collided with European employers' efforts to impose work duration and pay based on the variable month of the Gregorian calendar.[20] In Brazzaville, pre-existing notions of the week and the

demands of Ramadan also entered into negotiations over schedules and work-discipline.[21]

The towns and mining complexes of colonial Africa were the principal arena for imposing, contesting and negotiating a new consciousness of time. As Le Goff noted for medieval Europe, time was a 'net in which urban life was caught'.[22] In towns, a combination of pressures, not only workrelated, but also urban regulations, the scheduling of events both religious and secular, and peer pressures, contributed to a temporal awareness that carried more weight than in the countryside. Even those without clocks and watches developed 'a consciousness of time, learned and shared among the population, that is different from non-urban settlements'.[23] In Brazzaville, as people engaged in town life, they accommodated temporal schedules which were among the 'anchors of normalcy' in town life.[24] This was part of the very process of being a townsperson. Even those who came and went from rural areas and were less identified with town life or with wage-labour might choose to adopt schedules that, for example, involved Sunday as a holiday, since most people relaxed then and recreational activities were organized on that day.

However, the process of taking over new concepts of urban time was long, uneven and incomplete, especially in a town such as Brazzaville where, for the first fifty years of its history, the nucleus of permanent townsfolk was small in comparison to temporary migrant workers. It is not the intention to suggest here that a new temporal consciousness happened all at once, in a linear manner, or attached to some process of 'modernization'. On the contrary, it is rather suggested, as Halbwachs pointed out in his work on collective memory, that several notions of time coexist in any society. While dominant institutions such as the town hall or the church may contribute disproportionately to the emergence of an urban sense of time, the overall experience of time is built up from social relations between institutions and individuals.[25] Le Goff found that in the Renaissance period, people lived with an 'uncertain' and 'un-unified' time in which national, regional and rural time varied, while Thompson noted that in pre-industrial towns, where many worked outside the orbit of wage-labour, task-oriented time coexisted with 'harsher' schedules.[26] In spite of the pressures of the urban situation, Atkins found that Zulu workers in nineteenth-century South African towns 'did not completely discard their temporal identity'. This she attributes to their position as migrant labourers and the deep-rooted nature of their traditional understanding of time. Attitudes also varied from period to period and from one group to another.[27]

Although leisure is primarily a concept of time, it also involves use of

space. Cooper, writing about British attempts to colonize time in Kenya through inducing Mombasa dockers to adapt their work to capitalist rhythms, describes efforts to control workers through a 'narrowing of the spatial arena', separating those in the 'capitalist domain' from the undisciplined work culture outside.[28] In the highly contested ground of South African towns and work areas, issues of legal and illegal space, of segregation and squatters, were at the heart of the political struggle, as people engaged in 'holding their ground'.[29] In Brazzaville, there was no shortage of space, at least before the last decade of colonial rule. Indeed, there is barely a description before 1940 that does not refer to the sprawling nature of the settlement and the problems of cross-town communications. However, Europeans had an agenda that was related more to where and how people lived than to the amount of space at their disposal. Through urban planning and through what they called the 'beautification' of the areas where they worked and played, Europeans used space to protect their interests, not least of which was segregated leisure, where physical space was an instrument of social and psychological distancing.[30] The planned division of the town into two African districts and a European centre, which had been carried out by the eve of the First World War, not only aided a divide-and-rule strategy but had an important impact on the creation of urban identity.

Thus, although the small and struggling French colonial settlement at Brazzaville, undercapitalized and near the bottom of French colonial priorities until the Second World War, may seem very different from the emerging industrial complexes of the Central African copperbelt or South Africa, many of the same issues were played out, albeit on a smaller scale. The records of Europeans who tried to run the town and the memories of Africans who lived in the colonial period suggest that the struggle was none the less intense in daily life experience.

Leisure, though an abstract concept, is about concrete activities, and these take up a large part of this book. While Africans came to terms with townlife by creatively integrating new and old activities, Europeans also engaged in constructing their vision of a colonial society. As Eugen Weber has succinctly put it, it was not enough to be free from work, the question was 'free for what?'.[31] The dominant colonial class had a clear agenda derived from their dealings with subordinate groups in contemporary Europe, whether youth, women or the underclasses; from the need to impose colonial and capitalist order; and from prevailing generalized perceptions of indigenous societies and the European *mission civilatrice*. In many ways, colonialism was an effort to enforce 'a cultural project of control'[32] which sought to reach out beyond wage-earners to those whom administrators were fond of calling the 'floating' population,

who might contaminate the 'stable' elements in the town. Yet on a more specific level, the nature and depth of that control depended very much on popular initiatives, on the role of local elites as auxiliaries and on the instruments of domination available to colonial rulers. Even individual relations might influence the shape that a particular 'project' might take, whether it got off the ground or became a source of dissension and opposition. As the 'shoes controversy' and other incidents in the history of African football show, an activity that might at one moment seem a triumph of cultural hegemony could become a vehicle for resistance. Thus football, fashion and pop bands had different meanings for different individuals and groups within the town's population. Even participation varied. While some workers, like their counterparts in early twentieth-century Europe, might be too 'drained, numb, sluggish and stupefied' by long hours of work to 'play', and were more likely to be 'besotted by drink',[33] others grasped opportunities to incorporate familiar and imported institutions into their urban environment and create autonomous spheres of cultural activity.[34] As Terence Ranger noted: 'Colonialism *can* be seen as a single system', but it was also 'a giddy variety of existentialist experience'.[35]

The meaning of leisure has been inferred in the above discussion, and it is certainly easier to talk about through describing concrete activities than to define it, because that is the way it is experienced in daily life. As an abstract issue, leisure is most powerful in the minds of those who seek to impose certain activities or to structure time and space. The ambiguity of the term must be admitted, for it is open to personal interpretations even within a single culture. However, this does not preclude serious study of an important aspect of human experience. Rather, we need to understand its meaning and significance at different points in time and space. As Anthony Giddens notes, the study of leisure has 'suffered' because it has been perceived as a relatively minor sector of social life compared to other activities which are viewed as more crucial in social behaviour, and because of the ambiguity of the term 'leisure' as opposed to play.[36] Huizinga, in his famous study of *Homo ludens*, noted the universality of play and claimed to have found a word for play in every language.[37] And certainly, such a word exists in all the major languages spoken in Brazzaville. However, as Giddens points out, leisure is more than play, for it is juxtaposed with work and it can involve both non-obligated activities, what in Central African terms would be 'time for amusement' or non-productive time,[38] and activities that involve fulfilling social obligations, such as membership of an association or visiting relatives. The activities discussed in this study are those that informants mentioned when they were asked what they did in 'time for amusements'.

Where informants knew French, the word *loisirs* was used and understood. The answers included playing or watching sport, performing in dance groups, dressing well and going to bars, meeting in recreational clubs or gathering informally with friends and family. In the context of the colonial town such activities were full of significance for, as we said at the outset, they were to do with choice, control, identity and security as people mediated and contested social relations.

Writing Congo's colonial history

The colonial experience through much of AEF (Moyen-Congo, Gabon, Ubangi-Shari and Chad) is chiefly a tale of neglect, exploitation and brutality, especially in the early days of colonialism.[39] Compared to France's other colonies, from Indochina to the Antilles and Algeria to Madagascar, Central Africa ranked at the bottom of French colonial priorities. Once the area was conquered and kept out of the hands of European rivals, it was handed over to concessionary companies who operated an 'economy of pillage' for some thirty years.[40] The situation improved somewhat after the First World War, when the publication of such exposés as Gide's *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and Maran's *Batouala* (1921) fuelled the fire of reform. Metropolitan subsidies and a measure of economic investment, cut short by the Depression, made possible the construction of the Congo-Océan railway (1921–34), which was begun twenty-three years after the Belgians had completed a comparable rail link between Léopoldville and the port of Matadi. Opposition in France also brought an end to concessionary-company rule by 1930. It was only during the Second World War, however, when General de Gaulle fortuitously claimed Brazzaville as the capital of Free France, that the capital and the colony emerged into the limelight of French colonial policy. After the war, Congo was the recipient of French investment and the capital experienced a short economic boom which was the catalyst for a large increase in the urban population.[41]

Once Congolese historiography had emerged from its colonial phase, much given to glorifying the activities of 'great men' such as Brazza, Marchand and Eboué, scholars focused attention on the early French presence and the experience of concessionary-company rule. The late Henri Brunschwig pioneered the publication of edited collections of documents on the conquest period.[42] The tragic period of concessionary-company rule was researched by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, and her huge study remains the definitive account.[43] In the 1970s and early 1980s, structuralist studies using core-periphery and modes of production analyses documented Congo's position in the world economy and the

roots of dependency.[44] Other studies which have investigated the African penal code (the *indigénat*), the colonial health service, the spread of sleeping sickness, forced labour, taxation demands and the construction of the Congo-Océan railway have shown the extent of colonial abuses and African initiatives.[45]

Until recently, the study of town life in Equatorial Africa had largely been left to sociologists, urban geographers and development specialists. The seminal work of Georges Balandier and other scholars from ORSTOM (Paris) and its Brazzaville counterpart, the Institut d'Etudes Centrafricaines, during the last decade or so of colonial rule laid the groundwork for other studies since independence.[46] More recently, urbanization has been the focus of a 'team' of researchers at the University of Paris and several volumes, including contributions relating to Congo, have been published in a L'Harmattan series.[47] In recent years, scholars in Congo have also turned their attention to social history and popular culture, although most work has been focused on the period since 1960, and too little has been published, given the logistical problems African scholars have getting their work into print.[48]

This history of Brazzaville, therefore, is set in the context of a colony whose story of neglect and abuse goes far beyond the clichéed euphemism of 'Cinderella' which often appears in cursory references to Congo in anglophone textbooks. At times Brazzaville was a haven from persecution and harassment in rural areas, but it was also a dangerous place for those whose understanding of the world was based on village society. Furthermore, those who sought refuge or work in the town often found themselves the victims of inadequate food supplies and unemployment. As for European colonial administrators, a chronic lack of funding found them struggling to make do and many were eternally engaged in conversations about where their next posting might be and how soon they could leave.

A note on this book

The book consists of seven chapters and a conclusion. The first two chapters discuss the economic, demographic and spatial development of the town which was the essential background for the development of leisure time and space. Particular reference is made to the foreign elites who were the indispensable auxiliaries of colonial rule and the purveyors of new ideas on urban culture, especially in the town's early history. The segregation of space grew out of interactions between Brazzaville's European and African populations, each struggling to protect perceived interests. The shaping of space contributed to the social distancing of

people, not only Africans and Europeans, but also the populations of Poto-Poto and Bacongo which in turn contributed to the making of urban communities and identities. The third chapter, entitled 'The emergence of leisure', takes up the question of time and suggests how people may have gradually been caught in a 'net' of urban time. The policies followed by the dominant institutions to mould and discipline the leisure time of the population are discussed, as well as elite and popular responses.

Four chapters disaggregate the idea of leisure and look at specific activities. Each chapter tries to ascertain how townspeople drew on village life for inspiration, as they also appropriated foreign ideas. Although living in the town had a great deal to do with discontinuities, most people, especially those who came from adjacent districts of lower Congo, kept in touch with their rural roots. It seems important not to impose artificially the division between 'pre-colonial' and 'colonial' Africa that pervades scholarship, far less 'traditional' and 'modern', as it exaggerates lived experience. As we have already noted, the activities discussed are those that were most mentioned by informants and those that appear in the written accounts. A chapter is devoted to football, which was the favourite sport of the young men who constituted the majority of Bacongo and Poto-Poto's population for most of the colonial period. Efforts by teachers and administrators to channel enthusiasms into other sports because of pressures on equipment and facilities met with little success, for football corresponded to the needs and tastes of urban youth far beyond the actual physical exercise. Another chapter considers entertainment to be found in the streets, public spaces, bars, beer-gardens, cinemas and cafes. The streets remained the largest recreational space but, as entertainment became commercialized, it also moved indoors. Fashion and clothes are discussed, for they were symbolically important in mediating social relations, accessible to everyone but the very poor and a significant means of display. Finally, a chapter is devoted to European leisure, not only because many ideas were seized on and refashioned in African terms, but because the colonial discourse provides additional insights into the social and cultural dynamics of town life.

The nature of the sources means that the discussion may privilege some activities over others. Public leisure is favoured over private, group activities over individual, boisterous moments over quieter ones. These are not necessarily the activities that come to mind when one thinks of leisure in an African city. Leisure is also remembered as sitting around in a compound, chatting while the evening meal is being prepared; women tying their hair and exchanging news; playing cards; strolling with friends

in the evening and buying doughnuts from fast-food sellers who sit with lanterns at the roadside; or, in Brazzaville, watching the thundering rapids of the Congo river. Such moments seldom make it into the historical record and, therefore, do not feature large in this book. But they are no less important in the cultural life of the town than the activities that are described.